Synopsis

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States of America on September 11, 2001 devastated thousands of Americans and changed the course of history for nations and populations on the other end of the globe. The attacks brought the aspect of violence into world focus, while subverting and redefining the general perception that the most impactful acts of violence are usually committed by the strong against the weak. There was a momentary, yet seismic, shift in the dynamics of power, with the Americans feeling victimised and populations everywhere, especially in the West, feeling vulnerable to more attacks at the hands of unseen terrorists based in remote parts of the world. Terming the WTC attacks a "milestone" in the history of violence, Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim observe that the US, which had until then waged or supported wars in other nations, especially in the East and Middle East while managing to keep international violence away from American shores, "saw the end of... immunity to war in its own territory" (4). The attacks triggered a chain of repressive measures such as stricter surveillance at airports and random arrests without trial that curtailed the civil rights of American Muslims and immigrants, and fuelled acute nationalism and patriotism bordering on xenophobia in the US, while intensifying Islamophobia in the West. In the days and weeks following the WTC attacks, Muslims became the target of numerous hate crimes, and the targets were not just Muslims, but even those who were perceived as Middle Eastern or Asian in appearance (Bakalian and Bozogmehr 1-2).

These hate crimes stemmed from a narrative projecting the US as an "innocent" victim targeted by "evil" Islamist radicals who envied America for its freedoms and democratic values (Jackson 54, 61-62). There was a "rise of anti-intellectualism and growing acceptance of censorship within the media" (Butler 1) where it was considered

against national interest to probe the root causes that might have led to the terror strikes. The attacks on the US were universalised as attacks, in President George Bush's words, on "world's freedom" and projected as a clash of civilizations. Bush's rhetoric of the "axis of evil" (Iraq, Iran and North Korea)[1] and his warning to the countries of the world that "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists"[2] found support from large sections of the American public. Jean Bethke Elshtain and Martin Amis echoed Bush's rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the threat of Islamism, arguing that war was the only option to deal with the Taliban and their ilk.[3] Amis conjured up a West versus Islam battle, where the West, "a source of rationalism and sound judgement" was up against "a landscape of ferocious anachronisms... the medieval agonism of Islam, the Bronze Age blunderings of the Middle East,"[4] while *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, a staunch supporter of the war, viewed regime change in Iraq as key to the success of War on Terror, even though there was barely any evidence of direct links between Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaeda.[5] The narrative in the media was complemented by a simultaneous thrust in literary and cultural production that reproduced the dominant narrative by constructing the quintessential image of the Muslim terrorist (such as *The Terrorist* by John Updike, *The Teeth of the Tiger* by Tom Clancy, and others), depicting life under the Taliban and the Saddam Hussein regimes (for example, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *Mayada* by Jean Sasson),

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[1] "Text of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address," *The Washington Post*, 29 Jan. 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm.

[2] "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," The White House, 20 Sept. 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.

[3] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Is the War Against Terrorism Just?" *Just War Against Terror*, pp 59-71, Basic Books, 2003.

Martin Amis, "The age of horrorism (part one)," *The Guardian*, 10 Sept. 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety.

[4] Martin Amis, "The voice of the lonely crowd," *The Guardian*, 1 June 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/01/philosophy.society.

[5] Thomas L. Friedman, "Because We Could," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/04/opinion/because-we-could.html.

portraying Islam as a religion that condones violence (for example *Khalifa* by John Elray) or presenting the Muslim woman as oppressed (for instance, *Finding Nouf* by Zoe Ferraris). These literary works as well as other forms of cultural production not only served to legitimise the War on Terror as a military and humanitarian action, but perpetuated the construct of the Muslim as the Other.

While the government and media narratives were initially focused on Afghanistan, they gradually shifted to Iraq, such that by 2003, nearly 70 percent of the American population believed that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks (Milbank, Dana, and Claudia Deane). Thus, both these countries became prime targets of the War on Terror. They also became countries that the US and its allies wished to "liberate" by means of humanitarian aid and capitalist expansion. The US-led forces bombarded Afghanistan less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, and two years later, invaded Iraq to depose President Saddam Hussein. Both actions, interconnected in their method and purpose and yet disjointed, ignited widespread chaos that lasted nearly two decades in both the countries.

The invasions into the two countries unleashed a spate of violence, including not only missile strikes and raids by US-led forces, but also rebellion and retaliation by extremists as well as resistant groups on the ground. In Afghanistan especially, despite the initial overthrow of the Taliban, violence in the form of bomb blasts and suicide attacks continued unabated for two decades and culminated in a resurgent Taliban taking full control of the country in 2021 following a peace deal with the US and a hurried withdrawal of international troops. Iraq in the last decade has gone through a storm of insurgency, with the rise of the terror outfit Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its subsequent defeat in the latter half of the decade. Caught between the invading international forces and the extremist as well as resistance forces on the ground,

civilians have had to contend and cope with unprecedented levels of violence that not only altered their lives but changed the political and social landscapes of both the nations. This research, through a study of literary works by four Muslim authors, aims to examine the response of the victims of Afghanistan and Iraq invasions to the daily acts of violence, and simultaneously their response to the dominant narrative of the post-9/11 world.

Review of Literature

Over the course of the two decades since the 9/11 attacks, researchers have focused on issues like the trauma suffered by 9/11 victims and their kin and how this trauma was represented in novels; intelligence lapses leading to the attacks; the enhancement of security and implications of the enforcement of laws like the USA Patriot Act; the clampdown on immigrants, particularly Muslims, Arabs and South Asians in the US; the racial attacks and discrimination against immigrants, and how the Muslims in the US responded by putting in extra efforts towards their integration into the mainstream American society; how the image of the Muslim became synonymous with terrorism in American fiction, and the fiction of resistance that challenged such stereotypes. Focus on Iraq and Afghanistan has produced research largely based on the trauma suffered by American soldiers; the rise in insurgency; the sectarian conflict in Iraq; and gender issues related to the wars. Most of the research has been done in areas such as sociology, political science, policy matters and economics, while research into the literature that has emerged in the post-war era has been largely confined to American or diasporic authors whose novels portray the psychological and emotional impact on soldiers

fighting the wars in foreign territories, or the struggles faced by Muslim immigrants in the US or the European countries in the post-9/11 world.

The history of literature written about and after 9/11 developed in a sequence of genres, note Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn in their introduction to *Literature After 9/11*: "Early works often attempted directly to capture and convey the events of 9/11 and emotional responses to the events; as time has passed, the approach to the attacks has become more nuanced" (3). As the American response evolved from a patriotic fervour calling for revenge to indignation over the invasion of Iraq, the "political and historical frameworks for 9/11" also transformed "beyond the initially articulated binary of 'us' and 'them,'" raising "persistent questions about how we interpret and represent 9/11, questions precipitated by debates within and outside the United States about the 'war on terror'" (Keniston and Quinn 2).

Richard Gray in After the Fall describes how the West came to view Islam as a "sinister other" (32) that Western writers could not comprehend, leading some like Martin Amis to write caustic essays that demonised the Middle East while placing the West on a moral pedestal. Gray examines a number of literary works published in post-9/11 America to analyse how they deal with trauma and its debilitating effect on language, how they represent Muslims or Arabs in their works, and how the two different cultures, or civilisations, clash in these works.

Trauma suffered by 9/11 survivors and kin of victims is an important focus of research in multiple disciplines, especially in literature and psychology. Trauma theory, with its basis in Sigmund Freud's work and later developed by Cathy Caruth and others, has been widely applied to decipher and understand the magnitude of the event and its impact on the American psyche. Fictional works by Jonathan Safran Foer, Ian McEwan

and Art Spiegelman, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Jess Walter, Khaled Hosseini and Mohsin Hamid have been widely studied to examine issues like trauma among 9/11 survivors, the fear syndrome among Americans, the stereotyping of the Muslim identity in the West, and the voices of resistance (see Cvek, Olson, Lee, Verbestel). *Trauma at Home After 9/11* edited by Judith Greenberg captures the post-9/11 narrative in multiple forms - from trauma of the mass violence in New York, historical contexts of America's "own traumas of slavery and racism embedded in its fabric of 'home,'" to a challenge to the dominant narrative surrounding the tragedy (xviii).

Peter Brooks calls for introspection and argues that 9/11 was a wake-up call for America, a moment that ended its "exceptionalism" and opened its eyes to how the rest of the world functions. Brooks accuses the political leadership of having "used the cover of our mourning to forward its highly partisan political agenda. Whether self-blinded or cynical, it has promoted September 11 as an excuse for policies that are ideologically motivated rather than any reasoned response to terror" (50). Similarly, Paula Abood in her essay "The Day the World Did Not Change" throws attention on how the 9/11 event exemplifies the privileging of a White tragedy over a non-White's, arguing that "for those whose everyday lives are defined by colonialism, racism, war, state terrorism, dispossession, displacement, and exile, the political commodification of September 11 perhaps best represents the privileging of white-Western suffering over and above everyone else's political concerns" (576).

In the dominant narrative months and years following the WTC attacks, the image of the terrorist became synonymous with the identity of the Muslim, and the fiction, apart from movies and other cultural productions, produced in America at the time reflects this phenomenon. Mubarak Abdullah Altwaiji in his examination of the representation of Islam and Muslims in American novels like John Updike's *Terrorist*,

Tom Clancy's *The Teeth of the Tiger* and a few others finds that the identity of the Arab and the Muslim in these novels is constructed around stereotypes drawn from Orientalist texts. Tom Clancy's novel, Altwaiji observes, shows no sympathy towards Arab/Muslim innocents killed in the American fight against Arab terrorists, instead, it endorses a "scholarship (that) tends to Islamicize all sorts of abnormalities of individuals and generalize the wrongdoings of individuals and groups such as al-Qaida to all Muslims" (245).

Anushiravani Alireza and Abolfazl Khademi in "Representation of Islam in Post 9/11 English Novels" make an incisive study of the way Islam and Muslims have been portrayed in novels published after 9/11. Six novels by John Updike, Don DeLillo, Robert Ferrigno, Carolyn See, Laila Halaby, and Ken Kalfus were examined based on parameters like the discourses they emphasised and their direct relation to 9/11, and the result was revealing: "... the discourse shaping the texts (war against terrorism) and discourses shaped by the texts (Muslims are all the same, Muslims are violent and promote violence, and Zionists are innocent) are in line with the power discourse in four of the six novels; whereas, in the remaining two novels, the approach taken toward power discourse is quite subversive." The authors add that though this signifies "the presence of a multiple voice in the American society" the loud voice of the dominant narrative overshadows the weaker voice (1).

The subsequent US-led invasion into Afghanistan, and especially into Iraq, evoked sharp criticism from various quarters. Tariq Ali says that the American invasion into Iraq was motivated by other factors than clampdown on terror or finding Weapons of Mass Destruction, chief among which were gaining control over Iraqi oil, dismantling the Iraqi army to protect Israel, and serve domestic political agendas. But to blame Israel for 9/11, something that many Muslims do, is in Ali's opinion, wishful illusion (xv). He

emphasizes that Muslims need to rid themselves of self-pity and lead a much-needed change in the Arab world.

Noam Chomsky argues that for a majority of the people around the world, the US has become a threat to peace, a nation that is to be feared, and this has happened in just over a year since 9/11. By waging what Chomsky calls a preventive and not a preemptive war on Iraq, the United States sent a clear message that it will "rule the world by force, and if there is any challenge to its domination – whether it is perceived in the distance, invented, imagined, or whatever – then the United States will have the right to destroy that challenge before it becomes a threat" (Chomsky 2). By doing so, the US established a norm, the right to preventive war, for which it chose a defenseless target, projected it as the enemy to frighten the American people, and thus gained credence to its invasion.

Judith Butler questions the US for going to war soon after the WTC attacks, arguing that if the intention was "arresting the cycles of violence" one must consider "other passages" besides war as retribution (*Precarious* xii). She delves into several pertinent issues, such as dealing with grief, the indiscriminate detention of immigrants, and the vulnerability of one's life and dependency on another unknown individual, where at any moment, one may die or suffer injury at the hands of an unseen enemy. With a psychoanalytical approach to loss and grief, Butler argues that while there is an "erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed," the losses and grief suffered by the US are memorialised (xiv).

The 9/11 attacks and the American invasion into Afghanistan and Iraq have therefore been of much interest in the political, academic and public spheres. However, the academic interest has largely been centred on 9/11, and that on the war on terror

orientalised, with very few voices speaking up for the victims of American aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marcia Lynx Qualey observes that the mass-produced American novels on Iraq war erase the Iraqi individual while glorifying the American soldier. "For the most part, Iraqis are forgotten. Those who do exist are in the background, or on the unfortunate side of a sniper's sight." Qualey also says that a majority of the American novels on Iraq are written with institutional support of US government organizations, including financial help to the writers. Quoting Elliott Colla, she points out that canonization of war literature by soldiers is a partly funded "forgetting project" that "needs to be understood for what it is: an attempt to forget the many other stories that could be told about war."[6] In Afghanistan, prior to 2001, while there was a plethora of war novels by Americans, hardly any literature on Afghanistan was produced in English by writers of Afghan or South Asian origin. However, soon after the Taliban's fall in 2001, English literature on Afghanistan began to blossom, with writers like Khaled Hosseini, Atiq Rahimi, Kamila Shamsie, Nadia Hashmi and Nadeem Aslam emerging on the scene. Even then, most literary works focused on narratives of either the Soviet invasion in the 1980s or the Taliban era, while the post-9/11 narrative did not find much space, except in the works of a handful of writers.

This study will focus on an area where research is still in its infancy – the response of the victims of War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq to the violence perpetrated by the US-led forces and the extremist groups, as narrated by some of the Muslim authors in English in their works. A study of the works situated in Iraq and Afghanistan is necessary to investigate the gap that exists between the widely prevalent

[6] Marcia Lynx Qualey, "The literature of forgetting and remembering in Iraq," *The New Arab*, 12 April 2015, https://www.newarab.com/features/literature-forgetting-and-remembering-iraq.

narratives of the War on Terror, and the less visible stories of the everyday life of civilians affected by the two wars.

Justification for the Doctoral Dissertation

While "September 11" or "9/11" as an event has come to signify an epoch in the history of the world, and a tragedy that virtually divided space and time into before and after, the War on Terror remains an ambiguous phrase with neither an identified enemy nor a spatial boundary, and attempts to paint whole populations as terrorists or supporters of terror. Unlike their 9/11 counterparts, the victims of the War on Terror occupy neither public space nor public memory; they are mere statistics in the endless war. Therefore, there is a need to look for an alternative, less visible narrative of 9/11 and its aftermath that gets lost in the cacophony of political rhetoric. The voice of the common man and woman caught in the wars deserves as much importance and attention as the individual stories of Americans impacted by the 9/11 attacks. The US-led invasions were a retaliation to the WTC attacks, hence there is a direct impact of 9/11 on the lives of Afghans and Iraqis, perhaps to a greater extent as entire cities were destroyed by missiles and millions were either killed or left homeless. Therefore, the impact of the violence perpetrated by the coalition forces on Iraq and Afghanistan, and the response of civilians need to be part of the larger 9/11 discourse, just as much as the response of Americans to the 9/11 attacks. With the invasions, there was a certain dehumanisation of Iraqi and Afghan peoples, from the rounding up and torture of people who the coalition armies suspected as terrorists, and raids on Iraqi civilian houses in search of the elusive Weapons of Mass Destruction, signifying a hegemonic power at work that viewed the civilians as the lesser Other. The response of civilians to the daily scenes of violence requires a deeper study in order to understand what it means to be in

the midst of a war that had no definite enemy nor an end in sight, and which has escaped the larger 9/11 narrative. Through a close reading of select literary works, this research attempts to examine how people trapped in the wars responded to such violence and the myriad ways in which the dominant narrative is interrogated and resisted.

Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative research that aims to analyse primary texts set in the aftermath of the US-led invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq. The primary texts have been analysed through a process of meticulous reading and application of pertinent theories, aided by an extensive reading of secondary sources. As the thesis aims to study the phenomenon of violence in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 scenario, theories or analytical frameworks by Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Steven Lukes, Frantz Fanon, Slavoj Zizek, Johann Galtung, James C. Scott, Reyko Huang, Akeel Bilgrami, Robin Patric Clair, as well as commentaries by Saba Mahmood, Edward Said, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ahmed Rashid, Janet Jakobsen, Chandra Mohanty, and many others have been employed to analyse the texts.

Primary texts from diverse genres have been chosen for the study. These include fiction, a memoir, a blog narrative published in two volumes, and a science fiction satire. These genres have their own specific locations and cater to different sets of audience, which widens their reach and makes it possible for alternative narratives to perpetuate in various literary forms. The choice of different genres thus allows for the exploration of diverse narratives that responded to the post-9/11 world.

Primary Texts and Justification for Choice

After an extensive survey of literary works including those by Western and Asian authors as well as translated texts, six literary works, three each set on the aftermath of the invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq, have been chosen for this study for the sake of detailed analysis. While the authors chosen are not necessarily based in Afghanistan or Iraq, they highlight the plight of civilians and the political, economic and social implications of the wars. The locations of these authors are varied – while the women writers Riverbend and Malalai Joya are from Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, Nadeem Aslam is a Pakistani writer based in England, and Saad Z. Hossain is from Bangladesh. Riverbend and Joya offer an insider's as well as a feminist perspective of the wars, while Aslam's identity as a Pakistani living in a Western country situates him in the unique positionality of an insider – his native country being implicated in Afghanistan's tumultuous history and he himself experiencing the effects of state persecution as a child – as well as of an outsider in his adopted country that was part of the coalition forces. Hossain, as a Bangladeshi, provides an outsider's view of the war, where the focus on the impact of violence is not on quotidian lives but on its more visible forms like street battles and gang wars. Additionally, the choice of Muslim authors serves to delimit the scope of the study given the extensive nature of the subject matter. Also, in light of the prevailing post-9/11 narrative that perpetuated a simplistic, Orientalist portrayal of Muslims, it is essential to explore the Muslim standpoint in response to the war on terror. Moreover, the literary works by these authors offer a narrative that mirrors a non-Western, and consequently, a less dominant or alternative outlook on the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. This however does not mean that the Muslim identity could be homogenised or crystallised into a single, monolithic definition, nor that a Muslim is better placed than a non-Muslim to respond to the dominant narrative. Rather, it is

contended that though the Muslim identity is heterogenous with vastly differing histories, cultures, languages, and socio-political experiences, the War on Terror viewed the Muslim as a homogenised Other and caused widespread destruction in Muslim-majority nations. This thesis thus aims to study the civilian response to this destruction and to the dominant narrative.

The works chosen for this study are Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*, Malalai Joya's *A Woman Among Warlords*, Saad Z. Hossain's *Escape from Baghdad!* and two volumes of Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning.* The last of these is a compilation of blog posts by an Iraqi woman in book form, documenting the day-to-day happenings in the lives of ordinary Iraqis in the midst of violence. All the works focus on highlighting the impact of war and violence on civilians, the myriad ways in which quotidian lives were altered and shaped for those living in the midst of war as well as those in the peripheries. The characters/people from the six texts come from diverse backgrounds: from an orphan raised to be an extremist to a social activist, women characters on the margins to a professor who adopts violence as a strategy for survival.

Nadeem Aslam is a Pakistan-born author residing in the United Kingdom. He began his literary career in 1993 with the novel *Season of the Rain Birds.* He went on to write four more novels: *Maps for Lost Lovers* in 2004, *The Wasted Vigil* in 2008, *The Blind Man's Garden* published in 2013, and *The Golden Legend* in 2017. Aslam's novels are a commentary on the political and social environments that shape ordinary people's lives. There is an intertwining of historical narratives with contemporary contexts, where the echoes of the past resonate within the dynamics of present power relations. The characters are caught in situations that are not of their own making, and their lives

are shaped by political and historical events beyond their control. To Aslam, every writing is political:

> From my viewpoint, all writing is political - even non-political writing is political. Coming from Pakistan, and belonging to the Islamic world, 1 can't not be aware of how politics affects our daily lives, how it is not just dry legislations and laws and statements. It's visceral.[7]

Politics and political events are thus embedded into the narrative of Aslam's novels. While *The Wasted Vigil* explores the events of the last thirty years that shaped Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet invasion up till the post-9/11 scenario, *The Blind Man's Garden* delves into the ramifications of the US-led invasion and the subsequent retaliation of extremist factions, exploring how these conflicting forces impact the daily lives of innocent civilians. Both works narrate stories of loss and grief, and highlight issues that plague contemporary Afghan society and simultaneously uncover the rich legacy of its art, culture, and literature.

Malalai Joya is a former Member of the Afghan Parliament who has consistently criticised the US and its allies for not just invading Afghanistan but also handing over the reins of power in the new government to warlords who were active during the Afghan civil war in the early 1990s. She holds the warlords and their US backers responsible for the plight of her country, and especially for the deplorable condition of the Afghan women, who continue to suffer under an abusive patriarchal system. When Joya, as a 25-year-old, spoke out against the warlords in their presence during the Loya Jirga (council meeting), in a speech that made her popular across Afghanistan and the world, she was immediately forced out of the room and later expelled from the

[7] Nadeem Aslam. "A Conversation with Nadeem Aslam." Interview by Sunil Sethi. India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 35, no. 3/4, 2008, pp. 348–361. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23006274.

Parliament. She made it her life's mission to fight for the rights of Afghans, especially for its women. Her book *A Woman Among the Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice* (2009) narrates her experiences as she travelled around the world speaking on behalf of the Afghan people and criticising the US, its allies and the warlords for the deplorable plight of her country.

Saad Z. Hossain is a Bangladeshi writer, who "writes in a niche genre of fantasy, science fiction and black comedy."[8] His debut novel *Escape from Baghdad!* is a war satire that combines these elements of fantasy, science fiction and dark humour to portray the ridiculousness of the US-led invasion in Iraq and weave together the fear and distress experienced by Iraqis with the phantasmic image of the unknown which that fear generates. Combining elements of dystopian fiction, magical realism, and absurdist literature, the novel mirrors the rise of this genre among Iraqi writers such as Hassan Blassim, Luay Hamzah Abbas, Ahmed Saadawi and others in post-2003 Iraq. Hossain explores the themes of violence and human behaviour in conditions and situations that subvert the normal. Hossain published his second novel, *Djinn City*, in 2017. His other works include *The Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday* published in 2019, *Cyber Mage* published in 2021, and *Kundo Wakes Up* in 2022.

As a non-Iraqi, Hossain provides an outsider's perspective to the war in Iraq. To Hossain, the "Iraq War is the conflict of our generation," and his novel was born out of an "outrage" he felt as a brown man and as a Muslim:

> In writing stories, it is possible to humanise the people who have been deliberately erased. So yes, this is perhaps the outrage one feels being Muslim,

[8] Authors, *Aleph Book Company*, https://www.alephbookcompany.com/authors/saad-z-hossain/.

> being brown, being from the global south, watching our wealth be stripped away.[9]

His novel, set in the aftermath of the Iraqi civil war when armed militias had taken over the streets of Baghdad, depicts the cacophony, corruption and power struggles that defined the war.

Riverbend is the pseudonym of a 24-year-old Iraqi Muslim woman who started a blog on August 17, 2003, four months and eight days after the US-led forces took control of her city. Through her blog, titled "Baghdad Burning" she voices her protest against the US occupation of Iraq, while narrating the day-to-day experiences of Iraqis during the course of the war. The blog, and thereby the internet, becomes her agency through which she is able to respond to the daily scenes of violence and chaos around her. With an incisive and insightful commentary on political developments and current affairs, she shows a side of the war that often challenges the narrative depicted in the Western media. Her blog was born out of a desire to shift the focus on the "ugly side of the occupation - i.e. the deaths, the destruction and the complete and total lack of the most basic security."[10] Her blog was compiled and published in two volumes.

The voice of the women authors in this study is significant especially because of the narrative that has been constructed around women from Afghanistan and Iraq, who are usually depicted as oppressed and voiceless. Though it cannot be denied that patriarchal societies in these nations, especially Afghanistan, have subjugated women, the women authors here challenge this patriarchy and orientalist depiction by speaking up not only for themselves and other women, but for their nations. Fiercely patriotic and

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[9] Saad Z. Hossain, "A Writer of Hope, Humour, and Resistance: An Interview with Saad Z. Hossain." Interview by Mohammad A. Quayum, Asiatic, vol 17, no. 2, Dec. 2023.

[10] Riverbend. "The Girl Blogger from Iraq." Interview by Lakshmi Chaudhry. *Alter Net*, 20 Apr. 2005, https://www.alternet.org/2005/04/the_girl_blogger_from_iraq/.

anti-occupation, Joya and Riverbend lash out against radical Islamists and berate the Western powers for claiming to liberate them. Both symbolise a protest of the Muslim woman who is not afraid to speak out against power, and subvert the Western narrative that women in these nations need an external power to liberate them.

Objectives

Although they differ vastly in their culture, linguistic makeup, and history, Afghanistan and Iraq are similar in the way they became politically unstable in the twenty-first century, turning into hotbeds of violence. Afghans and Iraqis share similar stories of loss, grief, and displacement, differing only in degrees and the context of violence. Having witnessed several political and social upheavals over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, both Afghanistan and Iraq have long, albeit dissimilar, histories of violence: whether in the form of recurring coups, oppressive governments, rebellions or invasions, violence has become part of the daily lives of the people of these two countries. Since the onset of the 1980s, violence has dictated the lives of millions living in these two nations, displacing them, forcing them to become refugees or deal with death and poverty on a daily basis. Violence, in its many forms, therefore plays a cardinal role in this study undertaken on these two nations.

This study aims to examine the response of Afghans and Iraqis to violence perpetrated by various actors in the aftermath of the WTC attacks as evinced in the primary texts. Through a meticulous analysis of the texts and application of pertinent theories, various manifestations of violence are explored in relation to three central themes: namely identity, power, and silence. Identity and power lie at the core of most conflicts and acts of violence, while silence acts as both an instrument of power and a

marker of resistance. The study examines how identity, power, and silence function in relation to violence perpetrated by dominant forces, it also explores the myriad ways in which these elements serve as instruments of resistance against domination. The thesis thus endeavors to analyse not only the numerous instances of violence, direct and indirect, and visible and invisible, that occur in the texts, but also resistances in multiple forms, from acts of speaking out to employing silence as a strategy.

The study also attempts to demonstrate how the authors challenge, subvert, or invert the dominant post-9/11 narrative, and in the process, chart their own alternative narrative. The authors give ample narrative space to civilians caught in the midst of the war. In addition, Malalai Joya and Riverbend speak from the midst of the battleground, and their proximity to the war gives them a vantage point from which they are able to view the war and its consequences simultaneously as insiders and victims. An examination of the alternative narrative is imperative as it allows space for the production of meanings and perspectives from the point of view of the victims of violence that may otherwise go untold and unheard. While the dominant narrative encompasses a lopsided power relation, the alternative narrative subverts such a formulation of power and instead is a voice of resistance. However, the alternative narrative exists within the domain of the dominant discourse in the sense that it does not create a new narrative but only questions, challenges, or protests the various manifestations of the dominant power.

Chapters

The thesis is divided into five chapters, including Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter introduces the research area, with a brief background to the US-led

invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq and the shaping of the dominant narrative that underscored the wars. It briefly discusses the widespread Islamophobia sparked by the attacks and its impact on Muslims in America and the rest of the world, and argues for the need to investigate the response of Muslims to the dominant narrative and the violence Afghans and Iraqis were subjected to in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The chapter includes a review of literature charting the literary and academic works dealing with different aspects of the 9/11 terror attacks, and identifies the gap existing in the current knowledge of the area under study. The Introduction gives an overview of the primary texts and the authors chosen for the study. With a brief historical background on violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, the chapter provides an introduction to different approaches to violence, followed by an overview of the chapters.

The second chapter, "Crossroads of Identity: Examining Violence in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* and Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning*" explores the concept of identity and assesses its role in the engendering and proliferation of violence in post-occupation Afghanistan and Iraq. With the breakdown of existing systems in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of the US-led invasions, new forms of identities emerged, resulting in confusion and chaos for both individual and society. In Iraq especially, the transition from dictatorship to electoral democracy was fraught with violence as emergent political parties and militias sensed an opportunity to fill the power vacuum created after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and at the same time, religious outfits laid claims to being the sole representatives of identity groups. Sectarian identities became increasingly contentious in Iraq as the Shia-Sunni divide deepened, while in Afghanistan, local warlords played a similar role in aggravating identity politics. This chapter employs theories by Slavoj Zizek, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Jolle Demmers, Akeel Bilgrami, and others.

The chapter explores the relationship between violence and religious/sectarian identity and how this aspect has been dealt with in the two primary texts. Importantly, the chapter examines how, especially in times of conflict, elite actors employ ideology based on identity markers to foster division and mobilise mass support for political or economic goals. Applying Reyko Huang's framework to analyse the instrumental use of religious ideology, the chapter examines how warlords and elite actors employ different tactics to use religion as a means to achieve their political or other goals, and how certain concepts are assigned new meanings or transformed altogether to suit their agendas.[11] This apart, each character in Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* is analysed to understand the impact of violence on personal lives, and the degree to which an action or event qualifies as violence from his or her perspective. An analysis based on the personal histories and experiences of characters allows for an assessment of the differential response to violence. The chapter sheds light on the Iraqi response to acts of violence perpetrated by the US-led forces, from midnight raids to the Abu Ghraib prison torture, and the rise in insurgent attacks. What is also analysed is the impact of the post-invasion violence on Iraqi women, who were forced to negotiate their identities as their access to public spaces became restricted with the rise of religious groups and militias with political support. At the same time, the chapter demonstrates how, despite identity politics, interpersonal relationships at the individual and community levels often transcended differences, especially in Iraq.

The third chapter, "The Cost of Freedom: Power and Violence in Malala Joya's *A Woman Among Warlords* and Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning II*" begins with a theoretical perspective on the concept of power expounded by Michel Foucault, Hannah

[11] Reyko Huang's framework explains the instrumentalization of religion in terms of four tactics, namely salience, boundary, content, and institutional tactics that elite actors employ for achieving political and other goals.

Arendt, and Steven Lukes, followed by brief historical overviews of the power struggles in the Muslim world in the twentieth century, and especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. Power came to play a central role not just in terms of the hegemonic, neocolonial occupation of Third World countries by a Western nation, but also in terms of new socio-political structures that emerged within Afghanistan and Iraq in the months and years following the invasions. The US-led coalition effectuated a fundamental transformation in the systems of governance in these two nations, the virtually overnight transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies sparking an intense cycle of violence, especially in Iraq. This chapter examines the repercussions of this abrupt transition, particularly focussing on the concept of power and its relation with violence. Both Afghanistan and Iraq saw the rise of informal power structures in the aftermath of the US-led occupation - warlords in Afghanistan and militias in Iraq controlled by politicians in power. The chapter delves into the nexus between the formal state power and the informal power of the warlords/militias, and how they functioned in a reciprocal relationship. In addition, the chapter looks at the economics of war and demonstrates how, besides being military invasions, the US-led wars were also capitalist invasions that impoverished local populations while profiting American corporates. Apart from Foucault, Arendt, and Lukes, this chapter applies theories by James C. Scott, Bachrach and Baratz, Henry Popitz, and others.

Additionally, the chapter analyses gender discourse in terms of power relations and violence against women. Both Malalai Joya and Riverbend dwell extensively on the impact of the war on terror on women in their respective countries, speaking out particularly against the persistence of abusive patriarchy in Afghanistan and the rise of religious extremism in Iraq. They offer insightful commentaries on contentious issues such as separation of state and religion, the practice of hijab, and so on. Joya's role as a

social worker situates her among the civilians with whom she shares a common goal, while her access to the parliament and international platforms endows her with the power to voice their concerns. Riverbend, on the other hand, occupies a position of both a civilian impacted by war, and has relative privilege by way of access to the internet in the midst of war which allows her to provide an insider's commentary on the war to a global audience. Their alternative narrative reflects the transformative, productive nature of power and its capacity to resist violence.

The fourth chapter, "Darkened Spaces: Silence and Violence in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* and Saad Z. Hossain's *Escape from Baghdad!*" probes the intricate connection between silence and acts of violence, and how silence functions as both an instrument of power as well as a medium of resistance. The chapter introduces the concept of silence with theories by Max Picard, Adam Jaworski, Robin Patric Clair, and Aidan Russell, followed by a brief note on how silence has been historically instrumentalised by dominant powers in Afghanistan and Iraq. Silence can take various forms where power and violence are concerned: it may signify oppression and/or trauma, it may be a marker of resistance or protest, or work as a tool to manipulate a population and suppress dissent.

An examination of silence is particularly vital to the current study on post-9/11 violence in Afghanistan and Iraq as it serves to excavate the many layers of oppression, resistance and resignation that lie latent and invisible in the everyday lives of civilians amidst the confusion and cacophony of war. It becomes especially significant in the context of the War on Terror which was characterised by the deafening noise of the American "shock and awe" strategy that aimed to silence entire populations and numb them into instant submission using brute force. The chapter attempts to probe how the authors of the two texts examined here employ silence as a narrative strategy not only

to explore the nuances of human tragedy in the midst of violence, but also explore how silence has shaped the lives of characters in the texts. The chapter explores the concept of silence and its application in three distinct yet interconnected trajectories: silence as a metaphor and a narrative strategy, silence as an instrument of oppression or its consequence, and silence as a form of resistance and/or resilience.

The concluding chapter ties together the concepts of identity, power, and silence and their intricate and inextricable relation to violence. This chapter discusses the findings of the research, highlighting how violence, perpetrated by the US-led militaries as well as extremist forces, has impacted the lives of people caught in the wars, and why their stories deserve to not only be heard, but also become a part of the larger 9/11 narrative.

Findings

The war on terror was rooted in a dominant narrative centred around the notions of American exceptionalism, demonization of the Muslim identity, a distorted view of Islam as a religion that encourages violence and subjugates women, and sweeping generalisations of Afghanistan and Iraq as breeding grounds of terrorism and thus a threat to the world. The literary works examined in this study reveal the existence of narratives that not only challenge but subvert the dominant narrative by focusing attention on the geopolitical, historical, and socio-economic factors underlying the post-Cold War conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and crucially, highlighting the role of the West in engendering such conditions. In the process of subverting the dominant narrative, what emerges is an alternative or counter-narrative, embedded in which is the

Afghan and Iraqi response to the violence that was inflicted upon them by the war on terror.

The alternative narrative takes into account the historical, social, and political realities which mark the evolution of the Muslim world and underpin the various forms of violence that characterised Afghanistan and Iraq in the late twentieth century. The alternative narrative however does not imply a complete rejection of the dominant narrative: rather, it acknowledges some of the issues raised by the dominant narrative, but instead of reinforcing the discourses of those in positions of power, the alternative narrative shifts the focus away from dominant powers and directs attention on the marginalised. It sheds light on the workings of power and the deployment of identity-based discourses by those in positions of power and how such discourses serve to mobilise support for the violence they unleash. There is a co-relation between modes of power and the processes of identity formation, which in turn enables the preservation of dominant systems and ideologies through means of violence. As we have seen, the modes of violence sustaining such systems of domination vary, and need not always be overt or visible. The foray of Western capitalists in war-torn Iraq, for example, created massive disparities in employment leading to widespread disillusionment and engendered conditions for violence. The invisible capitalist violence affecting the livelihoods of thousands of civilians thus translated into visible violence on the streets. The dominant narrative ignores, dismisses, or in some instances reinforces, these less visible forms of violence. Sustenance of systems of domination requires the weaponisation of silence not only to suppress dissent and erase alternative voices, but also to construct and disseminate the narrative of those in positions of power. Identity, power, and silence thus appear in a synchronous relationship, employing different forms of violence – both visible and invisible – in the process of construction of the dominant

narrative. Subverting or challenging this dominant narrative involves problematising the very elements that sustain it: that is, identity, power and silence.

The authors examined in this study undertake this task, firstly, by demonstrating that identity markers such as religion, ethnicity, and gender are complex, formed as a result of a series of historical, social, and political changes brought on by wars, domestic conflicts, and international interventions, and cannot be compartmentalised in binary terms as done by the dominant narrative that seeks to homogenise Muslims or Islam in opposition to the West. Secondly, subverting or challenging dominant powers involves resistance that seeks to undermine those powers or employ alternative means of power themselves: for instance, while the mainstream media is used to propagate the dominant narrative, Riverbend employs her blog as an alternative medium to share her lived experiences, thereby not only contesting the media and official narratives, but shifting the focus on the less visible victims of the war. Joya works her way to a position of power from bottom up, garnering support of the masses as against the top-down imposition of power by the warlords, and while in a position of power, she uses that position to speak for those who have neither privilege nor access. Power thus has emancipatory function as well. Thirdly, while power can silence dissent and shut out all narratives except the dominant one, resistance against power involves a breaking of silence. The authors demonstrate that silence can also function as a strategy of resistance, as well as a coping mechanism or a deterrence against violence. Through acts of speaking back or employing silence, the alternative narrative in itself becomes a symbol of resistance, an act that reclaims agency and has the capacity to empower those on the receiving end of asymmetrical power relations.

A key response to the violence evident in the texts examined here is resistance. In Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*, resistance is evident

in the way the narrative rejects the ahistorical, Orientalist rhetoric of the pro-war West that characterises Islam as inherently violent and Afghans as guilty by virtue of their identity. Aslam dismantles the dominant narrative on Islam concerning multiple issues such as the notion of jihad, martyrdom, women's rights, and violent acts like terrorism and suicide bombings. In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam infuses the young terrorist Casa's character with a sensitivity for emotions such as love, a curiosity to learn and explore, and emphasizes the socio-political and historical factors that shaped his jihadist beliefs. In doing so, Aslam deconstructs the contentious image of the typical terrorist and humanises him. Importantly, Aslam draws a parallel between religious extremism and the American pro-war narrative that characterised the war on terror, demonstrating that the two ends of the civilizational divide are essentially analogous and both consider violence as a legitimate means to obliterate the other. Through the portrayal of warlords Nabi Khan and Gul Rasool, Aslam demonstrates the instrumentalisation of religious ideology for political and economic gains. He shows that religion, being at the core of individual and community identity, is instrumentalised to gain legitimacy as well as exercise power and control, and for securing personal, political or economic goals. Additionally, Aslam problematises and subverts the dominant narrative on the phenomenon of suicide bombing by exploring the diverse motivations, historical conditions, and complexities that inform the phenomenon. The reference to America historically employing the unwilling Afghans on suicide missions underscores not only the Western power's complicity but also the hegemonic othering of Afghans as expendables. In both the works, Aslam thus shows that although puritans and extremists do sanctify their actions on the basis of religious texts, religion serves more as a crutch to achieve other goals rather than being a primary impetus in itself. The two texts draw attention to this very problem facing the larger Muslim community, and through

characters that speak up against puritanical and extremist forces (such as Dunia, Rohan, and civilians of Heer) emphasize that the solution must come from within the community rather than without. The alternative narrative thus acknowledges the presence of elements that are inimical to the Muslim community and registers a protest against both the puritanical forces and the West that has been not only complicit in their emergence but uses them as a pretext for neocolonial pursuits.

This alternative narrative is even more evident in the texts by Malalai Joya and Riverbend: both women express concerns about the political empowering of radical Islamists in the aftermath of the invasions, and lay the blame squarely on the US for the impunity with which the warlords and Islamist militias came to control public and personal spaces by imposing discriminatory laws, especially in Iraq. Contrary to the homogenising trope that informed the war on terror, Joya and Riverbend make a clear distinction between ordinary Muslims and Islamists, arguing that the former do not need the latter to impose a religion that is already their cultural identity and a way of life. Their argument in favour of the separation of state and religion is premised not upon Islam's supposed incompatibility with democracy, but their fears that Islamists would instrumentalise religion to suit their agendas and restrict the personal freedoms of women, and instead of the promised democracy, their countries would devolve into autocratic theocracies.

The characters in Saad Z. Hossain's *Escape from Baghdad* challenge the conventional image of the Arab Muslim men and women in a number of ways: while Dagr and Kinza disrupt the dominant narrative of the ultra-devout, oppressive Muslim male, Sabeen's flamboyance subverts the Orientalist image of the submissive, agency-less Muslim woman. The text gives an insight into the empowering of a section of quasi-religious leaders, and how the post-war conditions enabled them to rule the streets with

impunity with their gangs and militias. Their motivations to commit violence do not stem from any religious obligation, but from political aspirations that are directed at consolidating position and power, and inducing fear in enemies.

The works examined in this study thus indicate a differential response to religion in post-war Iraq and Afghanistan: while to some it provides succour and meaning to life in an increasingly distressing and uncertain times, to others it takes a backseat as mere survival supersedes everything else, and for those in positions of power religion acts as an incentive for mobilising mass support, instigating jihad or acts of resistance, or inciting sectarian violence. Particularly in times of conflict, identity markers serve as political or ideological fault lines for power brokers to consolidate their positions. Religion being a marker of social and individual identity often evokes emotive responses among adherents, especially when elite actors create siege mentalities that foster fear, enabling power brokers on both sides of the fundamentalist – neoliberal spectrum to not only engage in the politics of othering but also legitimise their violent actions.

Another dominant narrative that the texts challenge and subvert is that concerning the status of women in Arab/Muslim societies. Malalai Joya and Riverbend not only subvert the dominant narrative regarding the status of Muslim women as being oppressed, but in opposing the Western occupation of their countries, they assert their agency and demonstrate how the invasions made conditions worse for women by enabling the sustenance of patriarchal systems of power. Both the women reject their imposed status as victims of oppression who await Western saviours, and instead accuse the West of being complicit in the social, political, and economic collapse of their countries. That they break traditional boundaries and generate public discourse against the US occupation subverts the women's liberation narrative on which the War on Terror

was centred. Their modes of protest – Joya admonishing the warlords at the Loya Jirga in Kabul and Riverbend utilising the medium of technology in Baghdad – are unconventional and normatively linked to the male domain, and require them to engage in acts of resistance and parrhesia in order to be heard and noticed.

Aslam too challenges and subverts the dominant narrative on the Muslim/Arab woman in his portrayal of female characters in *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*. The women in his novels dare to go against societal norms and discriminatory gender-based laws imposed by radical Islamists and assert their agency not so much in words but in their actions. Though they are victims of the relentless violence that has historically gripped Afghanistan, they are not submissive or passive victims, but women who defy discriminatory laws and fight against structural, system, and ideological violence. Importantly, Aslam locates the engendering of gender-based violence in the political and social upheavals marked by international wars fought on Afghanistan's soil. Saad Z. Hossain portrays both the impact of war on women who have lost everything and been silenced by its violence, as well as their silent resistance against oppressors. Through Sabeen's character, Hossain underscores the freedom, access, and agency that Iraqi women enjoyed before the US-led invasion.

The authors also depict the impact of violence on the ordinary civilians and their response. Civilians are not mere collateral damage: they are given voice and agency, their identity is socially contextualised, and their dehumanisation is re-humanised. From exacting revenge on the Taliban, joining the resistance against the invading forces to forming neighbourhood watch groups and resorting to collective silence as a coping mechanism against violence, civilians are portrayed as actively asserting their agencies. Thus, while the dominant narrative revolved around the primary belligerents – the US-led coalition forces versus the resistance groups, terror groups, insurgents etc. – the

authors in this study go beyond the binary rhetoric to show that ordinary civilians too resisted the war and post-war conditions in their own ways. This narrative also questions the dominant war rhetoric of civilian support to US-led invasions.

Intertwined within this narrative is the subversion of the war on terror's targeting of entire populations and the contradictory presumptions of both their guilt and their victimhood. The phrasing and framework of the war on terror placed the West on a moral pedestal while othering entire populations as perpetrators or supporters of terrorism. Not only do the authors contextualise the origin and evolution of terrorism, they challenge, and in some cases invert, its very definition in their depiction of violence inflicted upon civilians by the invading Western forces. Terrorism is divested of its hegemonic connotation that refers exclusively to violence perpetrated by non-state actors, and is extended to include violence perpetrated by the state, or, at the least, its selective application is questioned. This divestment of meaning not only subverts/inverts the dominant narrative on terrorism, but enables those at the receiving end of the war on terror to resist and assert new meanings to contentious hegemonic terms. But it is not just terrorism: the authors also challenge the depiction of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the larger Muslim world as being incongruous with progress defined by Enlightenment values. Contrary to the dominant narrative's ahistorical claims that Islam is intrinsically opposed to modern systems of knowledge, both Aslam and Hossain demonstrate the Muslim world's contribution to the advancement of knowledge and the historical space Afghanistan and Iraq occupied as centres or preservers of learning before their decimation and cultural erosion over decades of foreign interventions, wars, and domestic conflicts. Additionally, by describing past tragedies wrought by Western powers directly or indirectly on Afghanistan and Iraq, Aslam, Joya, and Riverbend subvert the hegemony prevalent in the memorialisation of

historical events and demand the recognition of pain and loss suffered by people in these nations.

Conclusion

The terror attacks on the Twin Towers and the invasions by Western powers into two Asian countries both were acts of violence that left behind a spate of devastation. However, while there has been extensive research on the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, the voices of the victims of War on Terror find little representation in this narrative. This thesis endeavours to go beyond the binary view of the civilizational clash and focuses on the manner in which the US-led invasions permanently changed the dynamics of the two nations, from the emergence of new identities to the rise of informal power structures and modes of resistance.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, the dominant narrative that took shape was specifically targeted against Islam and Muslims/Arabs, engendering a wave of Islamophobia across the West. This study therefore examines the response of Muslims to not only the violence that the invading Western forces and the Islamists unleashed on civilians, but to the dominant narrative as well. The violence however impacted not only Muslims but had wide-ranging effects on minority communities living in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, such as Christians, Assyrians, Yazidis, and others. The Kurdish community straddling Iraq, Syria, and Iran have long suffered brutalities under the regimes of these nations and their response to the war on terror deserves attention. There is thus scope for research into how minority communities in these two nations responded to the violence, and how they coped with or negotiated their positionality as minorities in Muslim nations. Violence may be further studied in relation to other elements such

as the construction and use of language, and issues such as domestic violence and violence against sexual minorities amidst the war. The post-9/11 US-led invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq thus necessitate closer examination of a wide range of phenomena that shift the focus away from the neocolonial dominant narrative and instead draw attention to issues created primarily as a result of international interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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